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SUBJECT: AIDS STILL AT LOW LEVELS, BUT HEPATITIS C VIRUS
PREVALENT AMONG INTRAVENOUS DRUG USERS IN ISRAEL

1. Summary: The incidence of HIV/AIDS remains low in Israel, with about half of new cases from sexual transmission. Most cases of infection from intravenous drug use are among immigrants from the former Soviet Union. At the same time, the incidence of Hepatitis C is high among drug users, and the health care community is mobilizing to educate drug users and the public about that disease. End Summary.

AIDS Cases in Israel

2. News reports on the morning of World AIDS Day stated that 4200 cases of AIDS have been detected in Israel, though there are likely twice as many additional HIV carriers. There have been about 300 new cases of HIV infection each year for the past five years. Thirty to forty percent of those have been detected among the close-knit Ethiopian immigrant community, with infection from sexual contact. About half of those infected contracted the disease following their arrival in Israel. The number of cases of infection from sexual contact between homosexual males jumped from 30 to 60 per year over the past three years.

Related Patterns of Drug Use

3. There are an estimated 28,000 heroin users between the ages of 18 and 40. Intravenous drug use increased in the 1990's, and about one-fourth of heroin users are from the former Soviet Union (FSU). Women comprise one-fifth of heroin users. The most significant predictors of HIV among drug users are previous foreign residence or travel abroad. Most drugs users with HIV are from the FSU. The absence of shooting-up galleries in Israel may help explain a general low incidence of HIV among IV drug users. Nonetheless, substance abuse specialists and AIDS researchers expect HIV/AIDS to increase.

High Incidence of HCV Among Drug Users

4. There is a high incidence of Hepatitis C Virus (HCV) among IV drug users. Rehabilitation treatment is offered to drug addicts. There are seven methadone treatment centers across Israel. Blood testing is performed for new entrants to treatment. Seventy percent of new clients test positive for HCV.

Public Less Aware of HCV Risk

5. Academics, health care providers, and government officials are concerned about a lack of knowledge about the transmission of HCV. A workshop in Tel Aviv in October focused on syringe exchange and information outreach to decrease high-risk behaviors such as sharing of needles or inhalation paraphernalia, along with public education about modes of transmission of HCV. Dr. Sheila Strauss of the National Development Research Institutes in New York addressed the workshop, noting that U.S. experience showed the importance of education, testing, and medical monitoring to arrest the spread of HCV.

Health Care Community Mobilizing on HCV

6. Comment: The Israeli public knows more about the means of contracting HIV than how HCV is spread. As with HIV/AIDS, treatment of HCV can be considerably more expensive than prevention. Israel's health care community is focused on mobilizing drug counselors to work with patients to prevent HCV and catch it early on if it has been contracted.

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